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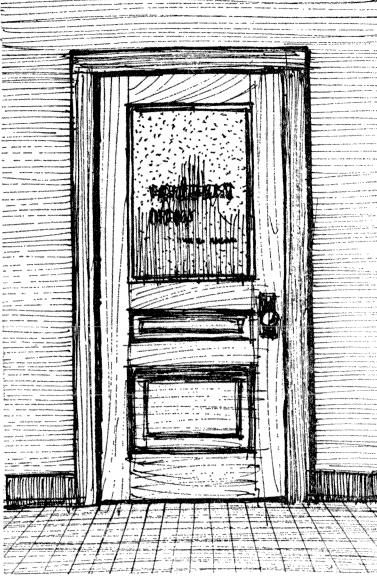
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The Big Advantage

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The Big Advantage

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CHARLEY Finley herded his sun-bleached '51 Plymouth off the gravel road and into Vilas in time to hear the noon whistle. As he rattled over the chuck holes he peered through his bug-spattered windshield at the lifeless Main Street. The odor of beer cans in his back seat mingling with the dust and heat of midday began to make his hangover unbearable. The Plymouth sputtered past the Vilas Weekly and the barber shop with the windows that begged to be washed.

Finley would be twenty-three next month. His gangly frame was hunched behind the wheel. The Noxema that he rubbed on every night didn't seem to help the acne on his face.

He parked in front of Erb's cafe and as he stretched the kinks out of his shoulders and legs he remembered that he hadn't eaten since noon yesterday.

The summer had passed too quickly for Charlie. After graduating from college in June he had decided not to work during the summer; after all he was a History and Sociology teacher now and summer was his vacation time. His father

called him lazy but his mother thought he needed the rest after the college strain.

Charley opened the cafe's screen door and walked in, circling the fan that rotated in the middle of the cracked linoleum, and slid into a booth that was watched over by a grizzly bear and an ocean of sky-blue water.

"What'll you have Mister?" The waitress had her hair up in pin curlers, beads of perspiration stood out on her pudgy upper lip.

"You got a menu?"

"No menu here, Mister, look on the blackboard."

Charley looked past the two farmers seated at the counter to the blackboard hung on the wall.

"Swiss steak or fried ham, that all you got?"

"That's right, you want to order or not?"

"Gimme the ham and a glass of iced tea."

"Damn place," he thought, as the waitress waddled toward the kitchen.

At three this afternoon Charlie was to meet the school principal. Charlie thought teaching should be pretty simple stuff; after all, if it hadn't been for those grades he got practice teaching he might not have graduated.

The waitress brought his silverware and iced tea with a lemon slice floating on the top.

"Say, where is the high school?"

"Go down to Grimes theatre and then two blocks north."

"Where is the theatre?"

"Just go east on Main, you can't miss it," she replied as she backed off toward the kitchen.

Charlie squeezed the lemon into his tea and gulped half the glass. *No more assignments to do, no more mid-term slips, just give a few objective tests once in a while. I'm going to enjoy life from now on.*

By the time Charlie finished eating it was one o'clock. He decided that he might as well drive to the high school now as later.

The car seat had pasted his sportshirt against his sweating back as he parked in front of the two story brick building with Vilas High-1908 engraved above the door.

Inside the school the air was cooler. The smell of varnished woodwork and waxed floors came to him as his cordovans clacked against the hall's hardwood floor.

The door of the principal's office was closed. He knocked and was surprised at the noise he had made. He cleared his throat and began to fumble with his lighter as he heard a chair inside the office slide back and footsteps coming toward him. The door opened sharply.

"Ah, my name is Charley Finley. Are you Mister Bye?"

"Yes, yes, come right in Mister Finley. You're early, aren't you?"

Charley guessed that the principal was about forty. His thick dark hair had started to gray. He wore conservative sports wear but the set of his jaw and the disciplined way he moved his muscular body reminded Charley of what he thought an officer would look like.

"Yes, well I thought I might as well stop in now as later."

"Have a chair, Mister Finley, we have quite a bit to go over."

The principal moved past his bookcase and sat, leaning slightly forward over his spotless desk. Charlie sat on the edge of his chair facing the principal. He felt small. He listened half-heartedly as the principal explained about the history of the school, this year's record enrollment and the exacting demands that were being placed on teachers.

"Well, Charles, we only have a week until school starts. Do you have any questions?"

"Ah . . . no, I can't think of any."

"Then I won't keep you. I'm sure you'll be busy finding a place to stay and preparing your lesson plans for the first semester."

"I thought. . . ."

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot, we would like to see our teachers take at least one correspondence course this year. We never get enough education. What were you going to say?"

"Oh . . . ah, nothing, nothing, I'll stop back tomorrow."

Charlie didn't notice how hot his car was until he was back downtown. "Lesson plans, correspondence courses,

Saturday seminars, progress reports. I may as well go to grad school," he thought, as the dust from the street came through the open window of his car.

Two days later Charlie submitted his lesson plans to the principal.

"Your plans don't seem to leave any room for discussion, Mr. Finley."

"Well there is a lot of material to cover and. . . ."

"We encourage our teachers to teach the material, not just cover it, I suggest that you revise your plans, Mr. Finley."

Wonder if I can break my contract. "I'll revise the plans tonight, Mr. Bye." As he closed the office door he thought the principal looked older than when he had met him.

This is getting ridiculous. There shouldn't be this much work to it. That old boy is a fanatic.

That night he made enough changes in his lesson plans to show that they had been worked on. He finished the revision in less than an hour and then drove out of town. He had made himself a rule that he would not to do his drinking where he did his teaching.

He had a dull headache the next morning. He didn't like to drink when he was alone so he had stopped earlier than usual; but his head ached anyway. He thought he was out of practice. He lingered in the cafe after breakfast and read the weekly edition of the Vilas Herald. He was surprised to learn that the school was still short one teacher for this year. He finished his coffee and drove to the school.

"Good morning, Mr. Bye," Charlie walked into the principal's office without knocking.

"Good morning, Mr. Finley, I had expected you earlier. Mr. Anderson, the school board president, was in and wanted to meet you."

Charlie glanced at the wall clock that said it was nine forty-five. "I'd have been here sooner but I was finishing my lesson revisions," he lied. He handed the plans to the principal. Mr. Bye frowned as he studied the plans.

"These plans are still not what I would like, Mr. Finley."

Charlie moved forward on his chair and put his elbows on the desk. He sensed that Bye had more to say.

Mr. Bye clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. "By the way, Mr. Finley, would you be interested in starting your correspondence course this semester?"

Charlie settled back into his chair. He gazed out the window at the parched school ground. Puffs of dust kicked up around the grammar school swing set. A side door of the gym had been left open and it swung slowly back and forth in the wind. *He caught me off guard the first day and started me running scared; but this job is just not that much.*

"Mr. Bye, I'm putting my cards on the table. I'm through revising my lesson plans and I don't intend to take a correspondence course at all this year."

Mr. Bye's face reddened. He stood up and moved to the window. "I asked you to do what I thought best, Mr. Finley. I've always believed in hard work and doing something all the way or none; evidently you don't share my enthusiasm for education." The principal's shoulders dropped slightly.

"Your demands are not in the contract I signed." Charlie made the most of his advantage.

Bye turned from the window. "You've seen the paper?"

"Yes, I have." Charlie replied.

The principal returned to his chair and sat down. He fumbled with the lesson plans. "Perhaps we can go over these before the second semester starts, Mr. Finley, you may see things differently then."

Charlie took the plans and stood up. "Yes, that may be, I'll be in again this afternoon and move my things into my office." He moved quickly out of the office. He felt confident. *This is more like it; I almost forgot there was a teacher shortage.*

Charlie closed the door; he didn't notice the principal's clenched fist or eyes that seemed to have lost hope.